

Lean Portland group volunteers at Friends of the Children

By Matt Horvat, December 3, 2012

Lean Portland (Portland, Oregon, USA; find us on [LinkedIN](#)) is a volunteer association consisting of 100+ Portland based continuous improvement professionals took action on their mission to 'give something back' to the community by working with Friends of the Children (FOTC). FOTC is a local non-profit dedicated to a revolutionary mentoring program that is transforming the lives of our most vulnerable children in the State of Oregon.

Four of us at Lean Portland championed the work. We had never worked together before, and that is an interesting story I will tell in another article. At the conclusion we had contributed approximately 200 hours of volunteer time, which is only a fraction of the amount of time that FOTC staff contributed. The end result was a core group of director and manager level people using a systematic approach to working on their problems and improving their effectiveness.

We started with FOTC having a wide range of ideas in mind to work on. To get a handle on the current state we co-created a value stream map for their core function – the children! We then interviewed about 50% of the full time staff through professional lead (and volunteer) focus groups to qualitatively validate our findings. Following that we pulled out what seemed to be the top 3 projects using an Impact/Difficulty matrix and selected 2 to work on.

The projects were (1) to reduce the amount of driving around and (2) improve meeting effectiveness. The Friends are required to travel to where the Children are to build and maintain long term relationships. It's part of the business, and everyone can agree they would appreciate minimizing this. Many of these youth change residences several times during the course of their involvement in the program, so this is an important issue for the volunteers. Meetings are also needed for collaboration and communication, but when folks get together to work on the business it is important for things go to smoothly and effectively.

With the projects selected we learned to measure progress towards our goal, have frank conversations about why we are the way we are and brainstormed possible actions. We picked a goal big enough to know that we had to really make significant changes to get there. For the project involving driving, our goal was to reduce mileage by 30% while maintaining a high level of contact time with the children (both were then measured). Like all complexity, there were a variety of contributing factors. The we got busy and dusted off some old solutions and created new ones. We generated excitement about an old issue and actually made progress. The end result is that a few very old problems started getting better. Here is a summary:

- ✓ FOTC has initiated a team to build out a Google site that will include online tools to reduce trips to our office and a map with activities by geography so that Friends can plan activities in areas where their youth are.

- ✓ FOTC has trained new Friends on a trip planner as a part of the onboarding process so that they learn the shortest routes and plan their weekly schedule with geography in mind.
- ✓ Centralized purchasing with one position and built new processes for organizing activities so that they are more efficient.

Even better was that as we, Lean Portland, began to disengage with FOTC, they had begun three additional projects using the A3 framework. Here's a comment from the director almost 1 year after we started: "Also, I've used the A3 project planning tool that we learned from your work with us about 5 times now and each time I get better and better at it. We now have a bi-monthly project-planning meeting with the leads of all projects to review progress and establish next steps. This has greatly improved our communication and collaborative approach to working together (a byproduct of our work together)." – Joe Bergen, Program Director, Friends of the Children